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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the portrayal of women in business in popular novels between 1890 and 1950. A comprehensive list of novels depicting secretaries and salesgirls as major characters was developed, and a questionnaire was used to collect and organize data. The characters were analyzed in terms of: background, achievement in their vocations, attitudes toward their vocations, attitudes toward marriage, attitudes of their supervisors and co-workers, and attitudes of their families. A stereotype of women in business was identified. First, women are confined to low-paying, low-status jobs. Second, women who get married and give up their jobs conform to others' expectations. Third, marriage is a full-time occupation. The stereotype of women in business reveals popular attitudes. Even though social and economic conditions have created unprecedented educational and work opportunities, women are still affected by sex-role stereotypes which limit their aspirations and their achievement in business. (Author)

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# Women in the Business and Office Occupations as Depicted in the American Novel: 1890 - 1950

by

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## The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the image of women in business who are portrayed in fiction between 1890 and 1950. Popular fiction reflects popular values and attitudes, and so the portrayal of fictional women in business provides data on popular attitudes toward women in the business world.

This study reveals a stereotype of women in business. Women have been socialized to a sex-role ideology which defines acceptable behavior and serves to limit their aspirations and potential achievement. Today's women must understand that stereotypes are based upon attitudes and do not reflect women's actual capabilities.

## Review of Related Literature

Studies of women in novels show how persistent stereotypes have dominated the portrayal of women. Cynthia Wolff, in her study "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature" (Wolff, 1972, pp. 205 - 218), describes the "American girl" stereotype in fiction. Educated and accomplished, the "American girl" Wolff describes speaks several languages, plays the piano, paints fair pictures, and

reads Shakespeare. The only genuine profession open to this "American girl," Wolff found, is teaching. But, as soon as she marries, she gives up her job and devotes full time to her husband.

In a study entitled The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels, Dorothy Deegan describes single women in 125 novels written between 1851 and 1935 (Deegan, 1969). Most of her single women lacked vocational interests or preparation, and those forced to work were domestics, child nurses, seamstresses, and schoolteachers. The way in which these women are portrayed reflects popular attitudes toward them. The study reports that the schoolteachers were depicted as unattractive in personality and in person, strict and prudish, and without dedication to their work. The dressmakers were drawn as middle-aged or older women, poor but honest, and likely to gossip. The domestics were pictured as illiterate and moronic.

Studies describing the representation of women in popular magazine fiction reinforce the stereotype of women's proper role--in the home. Ellen Hoekstra's "The Pedestal Myth Reinforced: Women's Magazine Fiction: 1900 - 1920" (Hoekstra, 1972) reports very few working girl stories. Women worked only out of necessity, and articles like "It Won't Do! A Warning for Business Women," admonished young, inexperienced girls for going into business "with an outlook on life that is mentally and morally feminine and in almost every particular different from her brother's."

Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1973) compares 1939 heroines in popular magazine fiction with 1949 heroines from The Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's, Good Housekeeping, and Woman's Home Companion. The 1939 heroines were proud, adventurous, attractive women, seeking careers and striving to create lives of their own. After 1949, Friedan notes that the portrayal of women shifts back to the stereotype of the happy housewife; a woman's existence centered on child-bearing, cooking, cleaning, washing, and providing her husband and children with love.

Studies by Lefkowitz (1972), Makosky (1966), and McBride (1966) have studied the portrayal of women in popular magazine fiction and provide further evidence of the sex-role stereotype of the home-bound woman. To date, little attention has been given women characters in sales and office jobs, although these have become major working roles for women.

## The Method

This study analyzes the portrayal of women in business in novels written between 1890 and 1950. A comprehensive list of novels depicting secretaries and sales workers as major characters was developed using references such as The Fiction Catalog (1908 - 1950) and The Book Review Digest (1905 - 1950).

A questionnaire was used to organize material for each character

in a consistent manner. The following categories were included: Background, Achievement in Her Vocation, Attitudes Toward Her Vocation, Attitudes Toward Marriage, Attitudes of Her Supervisor, Attitudes of Her Co-workers, Attitudes of Her Family, Attitudes of Her Husband, and Attitudes of the Community. To satisfy objectivity in analyzing the experiences of the characters, direct quotes and examples provide a means for establishing the validity of the characterizations.

Four historical periods were chosen to provide a manageable framework for the analysis of characters and to compare the images of women in business in successive time periods.

The Image of Women in Business: 1890 - 1914

"If a man takes a thing up, he takes it up for life, but if a woman takes it up, she takes it up till some fellow comes along and tells her to drop it." This quote is from William Dean Howells' novel A Woman's Reason and reveals the attitudes of many toward his heroine Helen Harkness' attempt to earn a living as a milliner (Howells, 1883, p. 466). Howells, who is sensitive to popular attitudes, depicts Helen as a dismal failure at a succession of jobs--coloring photographs, writing book reviews, and designing high-fashion bonnets--and depicts her employers as unsympathetic with her attempt to support herself.

The representation of several other fictional heroines in the period 1890 to 1914 reflects popular views similar to those expressed in Howells' treatment of Helen Harkness: (1). Only financial necessity justified a woman's decision to work; (2). Women lacked preparation for a vocation; (3). Employers hesitated to offer women the training they needed to learn a vocation; and (4). Women had a temporary interest in working because they expected to marry.

## The Image of Women in Business: 1915 - 1929

In the period 1915 to 1929 secretaries become major characters in popular fiction. What is striking in their portrayal is their competence and ambition. Margaret Bailey, though over-worked and underpaid, is the mainstay of her office. "She had taken all the petty details of office management that were at loose ends in his impatient hands and built a flexible, smooth-running machine of his staff (Kerr, 1918, p. 61)." Jeannette Sturgis, the heroine of Charles Gilman Norris' Bread (1923), distinguishes herself from the "giggling, simpering" working girls, "teetering along on ridiculously high heels, wearing imitation furs, and building their hair into enormous pompadours" (Norris, 1923, p. 56). She, too, becomes her boss' right hand but does not receive the recognition she deserves.

Saleswomen are clearly more industrious and competitive than their male counterparts in several other novels. Two of Edna Ferber's characters outsmart and outsell the men around them but end up getting

married.

The experiences of secretaries in fiction reveal frustrations with the limitations of being a secretary. Babe Evanson suggests:

> they say that stenography's the best stepping-stone for a girl, but believe me you can have a devil of a time getting away from it....they don't seem to think a girl has a right to be anything but a stenographer (Brody, 1928, p. 371).

Esther Lawrence, in Sinclair Lewis' The Job, describes the lack of opportunity for women:

> we are exploited, women who are in jobs. The bosses give us a lot of taffy and raise their hats---but they don't raise our wages...and they think that if they keep us till two a.m. taking dictation, they make it all right by apologizing (Lewis, 1923, p. 172).

Even the most competent secretary cannot break out of the secretarial ranks. When Mary Linden rises to become a private secretary, she pleads with her boss to let her try selling. He responds:

> You're talking nonsense. A salesman must go to the mills, holes in jerkwater stretches. He must entertain. Drink. That sort of thing. A woman would ruin herself (Schultz, 1929, p. 197).

Cora Schwietert, heroine of Ruth Suckow's Cora, also suffers discrimination. "Because she was a woman, they never gave her position a name, nor even put her name on the office door (Suckow, 1929, p. 107). Sarah Winthrop, of The Wall Street Girl, resigns herself to not getting ahead. "I might stay with the firm twenty years," she says, "and I'd still be pounding a typewriter" (Bartlett, 1916, p. 76).

Even when a fictional heroine moves out of a secretarial job, she is not given the pay along with the job title. Jeannette Sturgis becomes painfully aware of this inequity:

> Walt Chase was getting eighty-five dollars weekly as head of the Mail Order Department, and when I took charge, I received only forty. Although I have doubled the amount of business the Corey Publishing Company does by mail, I am today being paid but fifty a week. Mr. Allister told me when I asked for my last raise that it was the last he would ever give me (Norris, 1923, p. 459).

Underlying the discriminatory attitudes toward women in business is the expectation that they will get married. Fiction supports this view. Six of the fifteen characters between 1915 and 1929 marry their bosses, and three other fictional secretaries have a chance to do so--but refuse. For a few, a job and a career are a viable alternative to marriage. Margaret Bailey insists "I don't want to marry anybody" and explains that "we're working on a big contract right now" and "marrying would seem as dull as ditch-water beside it"(Kerr, 1918, p. 110). Even when her boss proposes, Margaret insists that she's not interested in the life of a traditional wife:

> I couldn't wear evening dresses and dance and give dinners and go to operas--and--all that, any more than I can fly out of this window and land safely on the ground. I'd hate to even try it. It's the life of a goldfish, not a human being, just idly swimming about in a comfortable bowl and being stared at (Kerr, 1918, pp. 293-294).

Her reason is clear enough. "This work is all I want to do--ever. It's my marriage--it's my art. It's all I want out of life" (Kerr, 1918, p. 297).

Jeannette Sturgis doesn't want to get married either. "It's the work I love," she argues; "I don't want to give it up--the excitement and the fun of it" (Norris, 1923, p. 160). Marrying would mean sacrificing her independence, and Jeannette concluded:

> She didn't love any man enough to make a sacrifice so great. She was self-supporting, independent,--beholden to no one; she could take care of herself if necessary, and after her room and board were paid for, she would always have $15 a week--$60 a month--to spend as foolishly or as wisely as she chose with no one to call her to account (Norris, 1923, p. 150).

Much later, Jeannette admits that her marriage fails because she knew she could support herself:

> I should have made Martin a much better wife, if I had brought to my problem of being his partner the passionate determination that was mine in wanting to make good as Mr. Corey's secretary. I always hugged to myself the thought if the time came when I wouldn't like Martin any more or like being his wife, I could go back to my job--and that is exactly what this thought led me to do (Norris, 1923, pp. 463-464).

For Una Golden as well, marriage fails to work. Relieved to be self-supporting again, Una wonders "how many millions of women in what are supposed to be happy homes are sick over being chambermaids and mistresses till they get dulled and used to it"(Lewis, 1923, p. 270).

Two other fictional heroines detest the dependent role of the traditional wife. After a three-month break from her work, Emma McChesney protests:

> I've loafed for three months. I've lolled and lazied and languished. And I've never been so tired in my life. Another month of this, and I'd be an old, old woman.... Those women who want to shop and dress and drive and play are welcome to my share of it (Ferber, 1915, p. 137).

Evangeline Knapp, portrayed in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's novel The Homemaker, is married and has three children, but she hates being a wife and mother:

> What was her life? A hateful round of housework, which, hurry as she might, was never done. How she loathed housework! The sight of a dishpan full of dishes made her feel like screaming out. And what else did she have? Loneliness; never-ending monotony; blank, grey days, one after another full of drudgery (Fisher, 1924, p. 47).

Although some women in fiction are honest about their true aspirations, and prefer a career to marriage, most men are resentful or threatened by this attitude. Others simply don't understand it. When Jeannette Sturgis is torn between marriage and work, her boss, Mr. Corey argues:

> I hate to see you wasting your life down here in this office. You're deserving a better chance. Business is no place for a girl (Norris, 1923, p. 217).

When Jeannette becomes head of the mail order business, three men resign their positions rather than work under her (Norris, 1923, p. 465).

Two heroines who leave their husbands to resume their careers leave their husbands dumbfounded. Una Golden's husband insists:

> You women that have been in business simply ain't fit to be married. You think you're too good to help a man (Lewis, 1923, p. 269).

Martin Devlin, too, is shocked by Jeannette Sturgis' decision to leave him. Lester Knapp, in Fisher's The Homemaker, is the only husband who understands and appreciates his wife's working. Rather than feeling threatened by his wife's success, Lester takes great pride in his accomplishments as a homemaker and shows sympathetic understanding for his children (Fisher, 1924, pp. 195-199). Husband and wife are happy reversing roles, but the members of the community accept Evangeline's role as a career woman and Lester's role as a homemaker only because they think that Lester is permanently disabled (Fisher, 1924, p. 287).

The analysis of popular fiction representing women in business between 1915 and 1929 reveals the following:

1. Financial necessity justifies a woman's working.
2. Secretaries are capable, but overworked and underpaid.
3. Secretaries are discouraged by their dead-end jobs.
4. Women with career ambitions resist marriage.
5. Women who have supported themselves don't hesitate to leave their husbands.
6. Husbands and co-workers resent women's work aspirations and underestimate women's work capabilities.
7. Office romances are common, and lucky secretaries "catch" their bosses.
8. Women do not have the right to take jobs away from men.

The Image of the Woman in Business: 1930 - 1940

In the decade 1930 to 1940 a number of highly stereotyped, husband-hunting secretaries are depicted. Faith Baldwin Cuthrell's heroines in the novels Office Wife (1930) and Career by Proxy (1939) represent the stereotype of the sweet, but shallow-minded secretary.

However, not all women in fiction are content with the role of the home-bound wife, and marriage-career conflict emerges as a frequent theme. In Louis Paul's Emma (1937), the heroine decides to leave her husband to support herself; she explains

> I've just got to go off somewhere and be something, somebody. I'm not alive. I'm living inside a vacuum named Bill. It's cozy, but it's not me. I'm tired of being penalized for being a woman. I want to choose. I want to find a glorious adventure for myself (Paul, 1937, p. 17).

Jane McAm, proprietor of a successful real estate business, cannot understand why she should give up her work--just to make her husband happy:

> I've scratched for what I've got. I've built a world of my own. I have had responsibilities of supporting people. I've made a reputation. Why should I sell out, or retire, or quit the game? What would I do with my time? Yes, even with children. They'll go to school. They'll grow up and marry. They'll have their own lives. You'll have your own work. What will I have? No, I can't do it. It wouldn't be worth it (Macy, 1935, p. 277).

The attitudes of the husbands are just as clear as the attitudes of their wives. Jane McAm's husband Rudi makes his demands clear:

> I don't want you in an office, wearing yourself out, getting old and nervous and thin and tired and doing a man's work. I don't want brains. I don't give a hoot about them....I want a sweetheart, a wife, a mistress (Macy, 1935, p. 275).

Another "self-made woman" in the real estate business, Catherine McElroy, encounters abuse and criticism from a husband who wants her to conform to his expectations; he wants

> a woman who'd not be too tired and too pre-occupied to love me; to care for my house; to mother my children....a woman to work for; a woman to whom one could bring one's success in order to lay it before her and say: It's for you (Cuthrell, 1932, p. 296).

Both Catherine McElroy and Jane McAm give up their careers to appease their husbands. A few other fictional women, perhaps realizing that marriage and career don't mix, have love affairs--with their bosses. Minnie Hutzler, Richard Roe's private secretary, becomes his mistress (Morely,1932). Another Morely character, Kitty Foyle, decides not to marry Wyn Stafford, her boss for a short time, because of the social gap between them (Morely, 1939).

Although secretaries depicted in the novels of the thirtees are still underpaid and over-worked, women who venture into new occupations such as cosmetics merchandising enjoy a degree of success. Delphine Detaille, of Christopher Morely's novel Kitty Foyle (1939), represents the new entrepreneurial woman. Emma Dutton, who manages an expanding chain of restaurants during the Depression

years, has exceptional executive ability--in spite of her lack of preparation and experience (Paul, 1937).

In the literature of the thirtees, an image of the career woman begins to emerge and new career options are explored. However, husbands of career women resent their wives' career interests and are threatened by their wives' success in business. These very clear attitudes continue to reinforce the stereotype which depicts marriage and career as being mutually exclusive.

The Image of Women in Business: 1941 - 1950

In the decade 1941 to 1950 the character of the secretary is surprisingly absent. Instead, the rags-to-riches theme describes the progress of four women, each of whom starts at the bottom--in an office, factory, or sales counter--and rises to head a business.

How do these women make it to the top? The novels would answer: by ruthless ambition, manipulative tactics, and underhanded methods of dealing with others. These women seem insensitive to their husbands and families too. Their divorce rate is high, and three of the four heroines have two or more marriages--all of which end in divorce. Mr. Salter, commenting on the way successful women in business treat their husbands, summarizes the situation:

> Find out about the successful women in this town. Either they've reduced their husbands to the position of male concubine and general handy man around the house, or if he had too much spirit for that they've chucked him altogether (Lee, 1941, p. 336).

The novels clearly note that success in business requires a woman's total commitment. To rise in business means being willing to discard a husband or to cheat a friend. These "traits" distinguish the "successful" business woman from all the others, as Mr. Salter explains:

> Do you know why most women can't make a success in business? Because they're more interested in holding down a man than they are in holding down a job....but the one thing you have got, that ninety-nine out of a hundred women haven't, is emotional drive. You give as much to your job as the normal woman gives to the man she loves (Lee, 1941, p. 335).

The characteristics which enable women to rise in business alienate their subordinates. One fictional woman earns a reputation for being a slave driver (Lee, 1941, p. 260), when she becomes a department store manager. Another, who manages a dressmaking business, cheats her subordinates out of fair wages and cheats her business partner out of a fair share of the profits (Seeley, 1949, p. 271).

The characteristics which enable women to devote total commitment to their careers destroy their marriages. Most of the husbands portrayed in fiction cannot tolerate living off their wives' incomes or realizing that their wives are more successful than they are. Devon Elliot's husband feels emasculated by his wife's activities:

> I can't see you up every morning at seven-thirty, eight o'clock, going through the endless details of that work day after day, traipsing around the country three or

> four times a year to check up on the salons and the sales force, knocking yourself out with advertising campaigns, radio and God know what, while I do nothing to help (Chase, 1943, p. 103).

The implications of a woman's career commitment on her husband, her family, her co-workers, and her friends is the central message of the novels between 1941 and 1950. Successful women in business are not sympathetically portrayed. Instead of appearing aggressive, they appear ruthless. Instead of appearing committed to their work, they appear selfish. When they don't relent to their husbands' demands that they give up their work, these successful women appear insensitive. The fact that divorce becomes a condition of success in business reinforces the view that marriage and career do not mix.

## Conclusions

A stereotype of women in business is based upon the portrayal of fictional women. First, the stereotype describes women's achievement in business. Women, for the most part, are confined to low-paying, low-status jobs. Second, the stereotype identifies what women's work aspirations should be. Fictional women who get married and quit their jobs conform to others' expectations. Fictional women who aspire to "men's" jobs have problems.

Third, the stereotype identifies attitudes that women should have toward marriage. Women should accept the maxim: marriage

is a full-time occupation.

The stereotype of women in business describes behavior which conforms with popular values and attitudes. When women conform to the stereotype, they minimize conflict. Throughout the novels studied, however, there are examples of women who are not willing to conform and remain "locked into" a secretarial job. There are women who demand equal pay, equal position, and equal status in the world of work. There are women who refuse to marry their bosses and there are women who prefer divorcing their husbands to giving up their work. When women challenge the stereotype, however, they encounter conflict and almost no one understands them.

Today's women should understand the stereotype of women in novels, because the stereotype reveals popular attitudes. The socialization processes passes these attitudes concerning women's proper role at work from mother to daughter. Even though social and economic conditions have created educational and work opportunities that are unprecedented, women are still affected by a sex-role stereotype which limits their aspirations and achievement in business.

Popular attitudes have influenced the types of educational opportunities women have sought. To the extent that women have

sought to prepare for traditional occupational roles, they have chosen educational opportunities to fit them for these roles. If the sex-role stereotyping of occupations is to be eliminated, girls and women must have access to non-traditional training options.

The study of fiction offers women an opportunity to clarify their values and to understand stereotypes which may influence their choices. A young woman may decide to conform to a stereotyped or traditionally appropriate career, or she may choose a non-traditional goal. Whatever the choice, it should be based upon self-awareness, not upon the values and expectations of others.

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